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Walking the Tar Sands: Poetry and the Fossil Economy

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ABSTRACT

Most literary representations of climate change focus upon its tangible *effects*: destructive storms and floods; melting glaciers and rising sea levels; wildfires, droughts and species extinctions. It is much less common, however, for writers to confront the primary *causes* of climate change and global warming: the mining and burning of fossil fuels over the course of more than two centuries, from the dawn of industrial capitalism to the present. This essay will examine some notable exceptions to this general rule, focusing upon the work of two Canadian poet-activists, Stephen Collis and Rita Wong. In particular, I argue that their representations of the Alberta Tar Sands are illuminating not only for the ways in which they integrate the effects of climate change with their sources in what Andreas Malm calls ‘the fossil economy’ but also because they foreground the politics of walking in a polluted and brutalised landscape.

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Most literary representations of climate change focus upon its tangible *effects*: destructive storms and floods; melting glaciers and rising sea levels; wildfires, droughts and ocean acidification. It is much less common, however, for writers to confront the primary *causes* of climate change and global warming: the mining and burning of fossil fuels over the course of more than two centuries, from the dawn of industrial capitalism to the present. J. R. McNeill and Peter Engelke note that the creation and globalisation of ‘fossil fuel society’ are ‘the most environmentally consequential development of modern times’ (2014, 11). By the early twenty-first century, fossil fuel combustion was responsible for ‘around 85% of anthropogenic carbon added to the atmosphere’, driving atmospheric CO₂ concentrations to their highest levels in perhaps the last 20 million years (McNeill and Engelke 2014, 66–7). Carbon emissions from fossil fuels are integral to the most ordinary practices of everyday life in the global North, from the ways in which we travel and heat our homes to the clothes we wear and the food we eat, yet they remain curiously marginal in the contemporary literature of the climate crisis. Indeed, Andreas Malm argues that writers’ failures to integrate the effects of climate change with its material causes constitutes ‘a climate-induced crisis of the imagination’, which profoundly limits the potency of literature’s cultural politics (2017, 126).

In this essay, I discuss the work of two Canadian poets, Stephen Collis and Rita Wong, who each trace the effects of climate change to one of their major sources in the Tar Sands of northern Alberta. Both poets are based in Vancouver and active in environmental and

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climate justice campaigns, including protests against the expansion of the Trans Mountain pipeline, which carries Tar Sands oil to a refinery at Burnaby, British Columbia. In 2014, Collis was sued for \$5.6 million by Kinder Morgan, the owner of the pipeline, for his role in encouraging civil disobedience and obstructing work by contractors on Burnaby Mountain (Nilson 2020, 82–3). Wong was sentenced to 28 days in prison in 2019 for her part in another pipeline protest at the Westridge Marine Terminal, Burnaby. The judge rejected her argument that her actions ‘were motivated by necessity due to climate crisis’ (Wong 2020, 258). In their poetry, Collis and Wong each seek to make intelligible the inner logic of what Malm calls ‘the fossil economy’, a ‘socio-economic structure’ in which the process of capitalist accumulation is ‘welded’ to the extraction and combustion of fossil fuels (2016, 11, 12). Moreover, both poets ground their writing in an activist mode of witnessing and foreground the politics of walking in polluted and brutalised landscapes. In their texts, walking becomes a means of enacting the writers’ solidarity both with local Indigenous communities and with the wider community of living things that is endangered by the imperatives of the fossil economy.

The Tar Sands is a region of 54,000 square miles of bituminous sands and clays in the boreal forests and muskeg of northern Alberta, Canada. With proven reserves of nearly 170 billion barrels of crude bitumen, the region has seen an explosion of investment and extraction since the 1990s, making Canada the world’s third largest oil-producing nation. In 2014, Alberta produced 2.3 million barrels of bitumen per day and is projected to increase output to 5 million barrels per day by 2030 (Barney 2017, 83). By 2015, Tar Sands mining was generating about 70 megatons of greenhouse gases per year (Turner 2018, 259). What the region produces, however, is not exactly oil; as Andrew Nikiforuk observes, bitumen is ‘a dirty, ultra-heavy hydrocarbon’ that requires intensive processing and upgrading before it can be used as a fuel, increasing its carbon footprint to about three times that of conventional oil (2010, 12, 13). Moreover, its extraction – whether from giant open-pit mines or via steam-assisted gravity drainage – is immensely destructive to the region’s ecosystems and watercourses. To date, some 900 square kilometres of boreal forest has been felled and its ‘overburden’ of vegetation and soil excavated, leaving vast, lifeless scars on the face of the landscape. The mining operations are also very water-intensive, using two and a half barrels of water to produce one barrel of bitumen (Turner 2018, 264–5). This contaminated water is stored in huge tailings lakes, which are leaking toxins – including carcinogenic polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) – into the Athabasca River, with devastating effects on the health of First Nations populations downstream (Nikiforuk 2010, 83, 89, 100).

The combined impacts of mining in the Tar Sands upon its Indigenous communities and non-human ecosystems have made the region one of the global capitalism’s most distinctive ‘fossil fuel sacrifice zones’ (Klein 2019, 156–7). Naomi Klein describes such sacrifice zones as inevitable by-products of capitalist ‘extractivism’, a politico-economic ideology that assumes that certain places or landscapes ‘somehow don’t count and therefore can be poisoned, drained, or otherwise destroyed for the supposed greater good of economic progress’ (2015, 169–70). One of the characteristic actions of extractivism is to drastically reduce the immense complexity of the living world, treating organic and non-organic beings alike as either resources to be exploited or waste to be discarded. Moreover, as David Farrier observes, the sacrifice zones that extractivism

produces typically 'exist beyond the horizon of perception', out of sight and mind for most ordinary consumers, and so offer particular challenges to aesthetic representation (2019, 52).

Collis and Wong attempt to make the Alberta Tar Sands, and the global fossil economy with which they are integrated, perceptible in ways that are broadly similar but differently inflected. Both poets have participated in the Tar Sands Healing Walk events, organised by local First Nations groups every summer from 2010 to 2014, which brought together environmental activists from across Canada to walk a 14-km loop of the mines and tailings ponds near Fort McMurray (Ellman 2013). '[L]iving and working at the endpoint of a bitumen pipeline', writes Collis, 'I needed to see its source' (Collis 2014, no pagination). What he found when he arrived in June 2014 was 'a desert', 'a lifeless moonscape from which the "overburden" of every organic thing that naturally exists has been removed in its entirety' (Collis 2014, no pagination). Collis's poem, 'Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands' – from *Once in Blockadia* (2016) – reflects upon his experiences, offering a documentary record of an act of resistance in an alien landscape through intertextual dialogues with several Romantic and late modernist precursors. Wong was a regular participant in the Healing Walks from 2010 to 2013 and has written of the events in terms that fuse the spiritual with the political: 'When we walk through the desecration, we are trying to reconnect to the spirit of the land, to assert that we have not given up our love for it, even when it has been exploited beyond human recognition' (2013, 136). This combination of animist and environmentalist ideas is a feature of several Tar Sands poems in her collection *undercurrent* (2015), which foregrounds the ethics and politics of water, particularly the unequal conflicts between extraction industries and First Nations peoples over the region's rivers, lakes and watersheds.

Wong's focus on hydrological systems enables her to make connections between extractivism in the Tar Sands region and the planetary threats posed by the wider climate crisis. For instance, she observes that 'the scale of devastation that is occurring in northern Alberta affects us all, through global warming, through violent destruction of Indigenous people's ways of living, through pollution of the water that perpetually cycles throughout our planet' (2013, 138). This sense that the Tar Sands are part of a global predicament is recast as verse in 'fresh ancient ground', where the speaker issues a stark warning:

those who don't respect the magic of ice
are doomed to melt it for their descendants

as miles of living medicines made by rivers over millennia
are unceremoniously eradicated, annihilated, wasted

everything leaking everywhere it wasn't meant to go
rainbow in the sky or on slick oil (Wong 2015, 17)

These lines imply a ramifying series of environmental impacts issuing from the violent destructiveness of bitumen mining, where leaking pipelines and tailings ponds not only pollute the Athabasca River but also annihilate the native plants ('living medicines') it might use to heal itself. The description of these riverbank plants as 'medicines' alludes to Indigenous forms of local knowledge and modes of inhabiting the landscape that are implicitly opposed to the extractivist logic of the fossil economy and its industries. Indeed,

in a prose note to the poem, Wong makes this opposition explicit, paying tribute to those ‘indomitable Cree and Dene elders and everyday people’ who ‘reassert human responsibilities to land, water, life’ (2015, 18).

Such responsibilities are at once local and global, however, and the poem not only refers to ‘acid rain drifting into Saskatchewan’ (17) but also acknowledges the significant contribution that the burning of oil from the Tar Sands makes to global warming through its reference to melting Arctic ice: ‘those who don’t respect the magic of ice / are doomed to melt it for their descendants’. In these lines, Wong reworks a well-known aphorism of George Santayana – ‘Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it’ (1922, 290) – implying that anthropogenic climate change is driven by pathological forms of amnesia, particularly those concerning older ways of ‘respecting’ the natural world. This link between bitumen mines in northern Alberta and the Arctic cryosphere is further underlined in another poem, ‘too long a sacrifice’, where Wong’s speaker observes ‘poison & violence leaking / into the Athabasca river to the fast-melting Arctic’ (24). In this image, the poem reminds readers that the Athabasca River drains into the Mackenzie River basin, North America’s primary source of freshwater flowing north into the Arctic Ocean. By conjugating images of leaking poisons with melting sea ice, Wong implies that a better understanding of ‘the interconnectedness of Earth’s waters’ offers a way of imagining the equally complex interaction of the fossil economy with the planet’s climate systems (2013, 137).

Wong’s poems repeatedly contrast urban North America’s ‘oil addiction’ with the ‘love of water’ (2015, 26) that is exemplified by Indigenous groups, such as the Keepers of the Athabasca. However, her scepticism concerning capitalist myths of progress does not preclude a meaningful intellectual engagement with hydrological science. As Alec Follett notes, ‘Wong’s understanding of water is informed by Indigenous knowledge as well as watershed ecology’ (2019, 50). This confluence of different ways of knowing and relating to water is particularly evident in ‘for Gregoire Lake *which way does the wind blow?*’, which describes a lakeside camp south of Fort McMurray the morning before her speaker’s participation in a Tar Sands Healing Walk:

in the fresh morning *hexavalent chromium*
 i dip my hands into you tentatively *arsenic*
 thankful to camp on your shores *aluminium*
 amidst mosquitoes, mud & grass *zinc*
 knowing you hold airborne toxins *thallium*
 from the tar sands *nickel*
 (2013, 68)

The verse on the left-hand margin of the poem addresses a morning prayer of thanks in the second-person to the lake, describing a low-key ceremony of washing that is shadowed by the speaker’s consciousness of the ‘toxins’ that lurk in the water’s ‘bitumized depths’ (68). In the right-hand margin, Wong lists a variety of trace metals sourced from a 2011 government paper, *Evaluation of Four Reports on Contamination of the Athabasca River System by Oil Sands Operations*. In this way, the poem juxtaposes the apparently objective discourse of industrial chemistry with that of Indigenous respect for water and its vital importance to human communities. It also illustrates what Hannah Boast calls the ‘transcorporeal ethic’ informing Wong’s

hydrological poetics, where water ‘links all life on earth materially and metaphorically as it shifts between chemical states and crosses bodily, national and species borders’ (2021, 753). Hence, the speaker’s tentativeness about dipping her hands in the lake’s waters, for she knows that the toxins listed in the right-hand margin may find their way into her own body, which will in turn become a site of contamination from the Tar Sands. The white space that occupies the centre of the poem, separating the lyrical verse on the left from the italicised names on the right, can be understood as a figure for the permeable membranes across which water ceaselessly moves and flows.

As ‘for Gregoire Lake’ shows, Wong’s poetry is conspicuously intertextual; many of the poems in *undercurrent* are framed by epigraphs or peritexts drawn from a wide range of sources. A similar kind of dialogical intertextuality is also fundamental to Collis’s poetics. Indeed, drawing upon the example of Robert Duncan, Collis describes poetry as ‘a process poets collaborate (and participate) in rather than originate’ (2012, xiii), remarking that ‘all we ever do as writers is pick up the loose ends of other writers’ works, and extend them a little’ (2018, 23). As the title of ‘Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands’ suggests, Collis’s major interlocutor is William Wordsworth, and the poem self-consciously draws upon Romantic traditions of nature writing whilst also confronting their limitations, particularly in a context where capitalist extractivism and the legacies of settler colonialism intersect. The poem’s engagements with Wordsworth are complex and multi-layered, but typically ironic. At times, Collis mimics the older poet’s affected and faintly archaic diction, particularly when speaking of ‘tripping /A landscape’ (2016, 61) or strolling ‘across northern deserts’ (62 – note the spelling). Secondly, Collis’s speaker occasionally apostrophises Wordsworth directly in an informal manner, as though he too were a participant in the Tar Sands Healing Walk: ‘Wordsworth – I feel you too!’ (62). Thirdly, the poem reworks specific ideas and images from Wordsworth’s poetry more directly. For example, in the following lines, which allude to ‘An Evening Walk’, *The Ruined Cottage*, and *Home at Grasmere* while also effecting a decisive reterritorialisation of Wordsworth’s poetics of place: ‘I brought / Your ruined cottages your / Evening walks and Grasmere / Homing here to the Tar Sands’ (62). A more thoroughgoing intertextual dialogue with Wordsworth is evident in a later section of Collis’s poem, which repurposes lines from Book V of *The Prelude* for an age of climate crisis:

Should earth be wrenched
 Throughout or fire wither all
 Her pleasant habitations and
 Dry up ocean left singed
 And bare or the waters
 Of the deep gather upon us
 Fleet waters of the drowning
 World – know that kindlings
 Like the morning still
 Foretell – though slow –
 A returning day lodged
 In the frail shrine of us aglow
 Old technology of people together
 Holding the line against changing weather (70)

Wordsworth conjures his apocalyptic vision chiefly in order to affirm the immortality of Nature's 'living Presence' (1986, 170), whereas Collis's stark depiction of the Earth's destruction is more closely attuned to the material conditions of open-pit mining and fossil fuel combustion – wrenched earth and withering fire. Moreover, it lodges its hopes for the future in collective action, the 'Old technology of people together', insisting that, in a rapidly warming world, the planet's remaining 'pleasant habitations' must be actively defended. Wordsworth's poem describes a series of spectacular effects without any definite cause, whereas Collis's recontextualisation of his lines pointedly integrates the effects of climate change with their primary causes in the primitive accumulation of fossil capital. He also interpolates lines that acknowledge the contemporary threats posed by rising sea levels and inundation – 'Fleet waters of the drowning / World' – about which Wordsworth could not have been aware.

Wordsworth is a crucial exemplar for the poem's ambulant poetics, which draws upon a Romantic tradition of writing in which walking is aligned both with wild nature and with the interests of the poor (Solnit 2002, 109). Frédéric Grosz observes that, rather than promenading in a garden like his middle-class contemporaries, Wordsworth 'took to the road like a poor man' – though he did so 'for pleasure and not through necessity' (2015, 210). This sympathetic alignment with the world of ordinary pedestrians makes Wordsworth an apt guide for Collis's speaker, a middle-class poet-activist and descendant of white settlers embarked on a Healing Walk led by Indigenous elders. Early on in 'Reading Wordsworth', Collis addresses his imaginary companion directly, saying: 'The method of our walking / From seeing to contemplating / To remembering – is yours'; though he adds, ironically, that 'no solitary haunts / Are here' (62). As in Wordsworth's poetry, walking promotes both physical engagement and an attitude of mental involvement with the landscapes and environments through which the walker threads her way. However, where in Wordsworth's poetry the natural world is figured as a source of plenitude – the 'living Presence' he invokes in *The Prelude* – in Collis's text the mines and dry lakes of the Tar Sands region are apprehended as places of negation and emptiness:

here we tread
 Together the shadowy ground
 Bright in the sun round
 The sharp place absence occupies (62)

In these lines, which adapt a resonant phrase from *The Excursion* – 'For I must tread on shadowy ground' (Wordsworth 1977, 38) – walking is a way for local Indigenous people to remember the places that have been annihilated by bitumen extraction. Yet, such acts of remembering entail a painful confrontation with 'absence' and loss, for the remembered places are no more. Through its sympathetic alignment with the area's Indigenous inhabitants, Collis's poem describes the effects of what Rob Nixon calls 'displacement without moving', whereby land and resources are expropriated by corporations or state authorities, leaving local 'communities stranded in a place stripped of the very characteristics that made it inhabitable' (2011, 19). 'This is where we walked and swam' (68, 70) writes Collis, echoing lines from R.E.M.'s song 'Cuyahoga' (about a polluted river in Ohio) but also giving voice to the dispossession of northern Alberta's First Nations, whose watercourses and hunting grounds have been irredeemably contaminated (Estes 2019, 30).

Crucially, 'Reading Wordsworth in the Tar Sands' presents walking as a collective and political practice rather than a solitary or merely personal act. As Rebecca Solnit remarks, there is a long tradition of parades and protest marches in which walking functions as 'a bodily demonstration of political or cultural conviction and one of the most universally available forms of public expression' (2002, 217). Circling sand lakes and salt flats on foot, dodging 400-ton trucks and documenting 'unfathomable ruination' (64), Collis's speaker firmly situates the collective act of walking the Tar Sands within this wider tradition of 'human protest' (65). This 'Huge sand-ensnared world' (63) is, after all, a uniquely inhospitable terrain for pedestrians. As Collis remarks in a companion essay: 'You can't walk off line in the Tar Sands – security and police are quickly on you. It is a highly regimented space – high fences, air cannons, and prison block barracks. Huge trucks rumble in every direction' (2014, no pagination). Consequently, walking the Tar Sands is an act of resistance to the 'highly regimented' abstract space that is produced by extractivism, where 'capital tears material components from their natural beds and heaps them up in places of its own choosing' (Malm 2016, 301) – or transports them via pipelines and super tankers to the four corners of the world. In Collis's poem, walking is a protest not only against the world of the open-pit mine and the tailings pond but also that created by the automobile and the petro-state.

By contrast, the walkers of Collis's poem are aligned, imaginatively and politically, with what has been removed in the process of extracting the Tar Sands' bitumen, the 'overburden' (72) of living, organic matter native to boreal ecosystems, its 'animal cohort' and 'plant polity' (74). Elsewhere, Collis refers to this more-than-human collective as the 'biotariat', arguing that under the fossil economy of late capitalism:

[T]he exploited 'class' now is life itself – all biological existence, the privatisation and destruction of which, on a planetary scale (the Anthropocene – or what I prefer to think of as geophysical capitalism), characterises capitalism at its furthest logic. And thus, [...] any new commune, any new rising against this level of exploitation, must be taken up in the name not just of humanity, but of the entire biotariat (Collis 2018, 137–8).

This solidarity with 'life itself' in all its forms, which is expressed in terms that fuse ecological and Marxist traditions of thought, manifests itself in a number of ways throughout 'Reading Wordsworth' and is often associated with the spatial practice of walking. For instance, Collis's speaker describes himself and his fellow walkers as 'old / Technology / Biotic and slow-moving' (2016, 67) by contrast with the rapacious, high-tech 'machine' of capitalist extractivism, 'Sloughing boreal off its bitumen back' (66). Indeed, Collis's 'biotic' pedestrian activists enact an uncanny return of the boreal landscape's excavated 'overburden' through their slow circumambulation of the Tar Sands dead zone. A similar affirmation of biotic resilience occurs later in the poem, where Collis's speaker declares that 'we / Are the vitality that springs / A weed beside the poison road' (74); while, in the final section of the poem, he describes a utopian vision of 'that time to come / When none of us will be disposable waste' (75). In these lines, the pronouns 'we' and 'us' expand beyond the group of human walkers that the speaker has joined to take in that larger collective of living things, the biotariat, who are subject to exploitation and destruction in the present.

This sense of solidarity with non-human others in face of the ecological damage wrought by the fossil economy is also an important element in Wong's Tar Sands poems. For instance, in her prose poem 'night gift', Wong's speaker describes the energy

of the sun 'feeding pine trees & the petro-state alike, giving us the days and nights by which to stand with the trees, what the oil industry calls overburden, or to die more rapidly, more stupidly, by peak oil' (2015, 23). A fairly stark alternative is delineated here between renewable energy (from the sun) and the rapidly diminishing reserves of the oil industry (peak oil) but also between a mode of activism that would entail 'stand[ing] with the trees' and a passive, even suicidal acceptance of the economic logic of extractivism. To stand with the trees is a means to what Donna Haraway calls 'making kin', a biopolitical practice informed by 'the fact that all earthlings are kin in the deepest sense' and an awareness that history is made by 'assemblages of organic species and abiotic actors' (2015, 162, 159). Crucially, Wong suggests that walking is one of the ways in which such multi-species kinships can be affirmed and expressed, particularly in the context of environmental activism. In 'fresh ancient ground', she writes: 'we walk for healing the scar sands, in a living pact with the bears, the eagles, / the muzzled scientists, the beavers who've built dams you can see from outer space' (2015, 18). Initially, in these lines, 'we' refers simply to the human participants in the Tar Sands Healing Walk, but because the act of walking itself is part of a larger 'living pact' with non-human animals – bears, eagles, and beavers – it expands to include 'all living creatures, plants and animals, not just humans' (19). Wong's punning reference to 'the scar sands' emphasises the mining industry's culpability in wounding the Earth, which is itself regarded (metaphorically) as a living being – rather like Haraway's 'Chthulucene', a collective name for 'the dynamic sym-chthonic forces and powers of which people are a part' (2015, 160). Moreover, in the image of beaver dams that can be seen from outer space, Wong finds an emblem of non-human creativity that contrasts sharply with the devastation caused by human industries in the landscapes of northern Alberta.

Wong and Collis also remind their readers of the biotic origins of the bitumen that is mined in the Tar Sands and processed into synthetic crude oil. As Chris Turner explains, the bitumen deposits of northern Alberta derive from the Early Cretaceous period, when the region was covered by dense forests and a semitropical sea. Following the Cretaceous-Tertiary extinction event about 70 million years ago, the bodies of countless plants and animals were buried by sand and silt and rock and then compacted into hydrocarbons over millions of years (2018, 25–6). Wong alludes to these ancient, biotic origins in her lexicographical poem, 'a magical dictionary from bitumen to sunlight', which glosses 'ancestors' as 'condensed over aeons into mineral wealth' (2015, 28) and 'bitumen' as 'buried ancestors, unearthed & burned to expand the ocean' (29). What these laconic definitions imply is that bitumen is the material remains of once-living 'ancestors', the bodies of fellow-beings or kin in one of their transmuted forms. In her Tar Sands poems, Wong encourages readers to reflect on the way in which human futures will depend upon more ethically responsible ways of relating to other beings, including those who lived and died in the geological past. Collis also depicts the Tar Sands in terms that recall bitumen's organic origins in deep time, referring to 'darkness under the earth // We didn't put there' and to the 'Energy of forests' (2016, 71) that is compacted within the fuel itself. His poem recasts the process of burning fossil fuels as a grotesque act of consumption, where human societies feed on the long-buried corpses of their fellow earthlings. Moreover, Collis pointedly links the inorganic sources of 'energy' within the fossil economy to those forms of non-human vitality ('forests') that are most immediately threatened by its mode of production. In these ways, Wong and

Collis both seek to defamiliarise their readers' habitual perceptions of fossil fuels such as oil and petrol. At the same time, by recalling the organic origins of bitumen, they espouse multi-species forms of political solidarity that are grounded in the spatial practice of walking the Tar Sands.

Walking puts bodies in motion in ways that are fundamentally at odds with the core principles of the fossil economy, its self-perpetuating cycles of extraction, combustion, and consumption, which are fundamental to modern transportation, energy generation, and manufacturing. For both Collis and Wong, walking is at once a mode of bodily engagement with the more-than-human world, and a resistant spatial practice that gives concrete expression to their poems' ecological and anti-capitalist politics. Neither poet writes from a position outside of or beyond the fossil economy, but rather from within its structures of exploitation and exchange. Wong, for instance, writes: 'It is not lost on me that I live in the belly of the bitumen beast, that by driving and flying, I am also implicated in the very oil addiction that I am critiquing' (2013, 138). Similarly, Collis reflects upon how his own 'romanticised claim on place' is bound up with the history of settler colonialism in Canada and its displacement of Indigenous people from their land (2018, 176). Nonetheless, both poets draw upon Indigenous knowledge and ways of understanding place in their Tar Sands poems, which are inspired by their first-hand experience of the Tar Sands Healing Walks. Their texts are remarkable chiefly for the ways in which they trace the tangible effects of climate change to their sources in what Marx called 'the hidden abode of production' (1976, 279) – in this case, the vast bitumen mines, refineries, and toxic lakes of northern Alberta. Furthermore, in the work of both poets, walking is a collective, political act that is closely aligned not only with the struggles of local Indigenous communities but also with the rights of that larger collective of living things, which Collis calls the biotariat. Wong's poetry is distinctive for its hydrological ethics, foregrounding the centrality of watersheds, rivers, and seas to all forms of life on Earth, as well as the threats posed to them by mining and oil industries. By comparison, Collis's 'Reading Wordsworth' is more terrestrial and allusive, unfolding a dialogue or collaboration with a key Romantic forebear that jarringly relocates and recontextualises Wordsworth's poetics of place. Each poet self-consciously adopts a pedestrian perspective on the fossil economy that is attuned to the bodily scale of walking but also seeks, through their confrontations with the industrial landscapes of the Tar Sands, to make the planetary scale of the contemporary climate crisis available to thought and to political praxis.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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